

# Greenleaf Review



2023



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Cover

**Seize The Day**

*Ezra Wilson*

Charcoal on paper

# Note

Phew.

Producing the *Greenleaf Review* is a wonderful thing, but it is not always an easy thing. This year has made that particularly clear to me—I've been working for the *Greenleaf* for four years, and despite not ever having been stuck working remotely, this was the hardest year. Technological issues at Guilford made it harder to source pieces... but we managed. We switched advisors after several years with the illustrious Jennie Malbeuf ... but Cynthia has been incredibly helpful and now it's hard for me to imagine the *Greenleaf* without her. We had only two students who had taken the class before ... but everyone new to the organization has blown me away with their skill and dedication.

Every edition of the *Greenleaf Review* has been a labor of love and a product of passion. And maybe it's just recency bias, but I can't help but feel this one has had the most love poured into it. Every meeting I've seen people taking on responsibilities that nobody signed up for because we didn't anticipate it. If it's something we could have anticipated, we've done our best to mark that down so future years won't be blindsided. As for what we couldn't have anticipated?

Maybe it's naïve of me, but I'm not worried about those things either. Because those of us who are returning next year are incredibly dedicated and talented. And because the *Greenleaf Review* also manages to attract incredibly dedicated and talented people.

Is that what people mean by “the magic of liter[ary magazines]?” Perhaps.

Either way, I look forward to seeing future installments of the *Greenleaf Review*, knowing it's some other poor suckers' blood, sweat, and tears binding the pages together.

If you're lucky enough to be in that position, then you are about to experience something incredible.

And if you're lucky enough to have helped make this thing? You're incredible and I am so happy I got to work with you.

Either way, I hope you enjoy the 2023 *Greenleaf Review*.  
Now if you'll excuse me, I need to take a nap.

- Ainsley Kalb

# Staff Credit

*The 2023 Edition of the Greenleaf Review Is Brought To You By...*

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**And Starring...**

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# Dear Diary

*Nili Ocran*

I visit the graveyard in my heart, where those I once knew lay to rest. I make a place for a part of myself, the part of me that fell to her death during the fight with depression. Though she is put to rest, I carry her memory with me to remind myself that she may have fallen, but she did not lose.

# On the Creation of Homunculi

Charlie Miller

*“In the practice of occultism and all of its relating practices, especially in the expansion and craft of a Maleficar (The practice of blood, see page 15 for further detail on the schools of magic and their relation) you may often find mention of rituals akin to this one, the creation of life, the homunculus, generally portrayed as an apprentice’s ritual, something one does when they first begin study. This is incorrect, intrinsically so. This is a highly advanced ritual, the misdoing of which could result in semi-catastrophic consequences, at least in its actual form. My competitors in the field have taught this ritual dozens of times in countless volumes, however, each one of them has been a falsehood. None of those rituals truly create life, they simply animate a vessel via drawing in abyssal corruption from the outermost spheres of the cosmos, something which is certainly useful and I would not recommend against as a beginning point, but it is a faulty premise. We are blood magi, not paltry necromancers animating crafted cadavers. No, the true magic of blood is that of life itself, and the idea that you should require help from the abyssal spheres and its powers to do so is quite frankly insulting to everyone who has ever practiced.*

*“The instructions are as follows:*

*For this ritual, you will require the standard tools of Maleficarum, that being blood, an arcane focus. I’ve found a sizable ruby gem will do you perfectly fine, and a dagger, one crafted to specific metrics of value. This weapon is used in several rituals; you can find a schematic for it on page 482. Additionally, you will need to copy the diagram on the other page, proportionate to the vessel you wish to bring life to. Three spheres, each drawn in chalk or, if you wish for a smoother experience, draw it out with ground bone, sulfur, gem powder, or another known magical regent. For a list of those, see page 124. The spheres should intercede with a central area to perform the ritual properly. Across each, you will want to draw a set of abyssal symbols. One sphere should have the symbol for ‘life,’ one sphere should have the symbol for ‘void,’ and one should have the symbol for ‘energy.’ You can replace these with the symbols of any sort of outer being that you desire; however, I propose caution: creatures such as the fae or the celestial will find this ritual abhorrent, and the wrong attention could very much be deadly. However, do as you will. After the spheres and symbols are in place, you will require material. For my*

*first foray into this ritual, I had a grouping of local hooligans catch an infantile dragon by surprise, and had the mangled and beaten body dropped off at my laboratory. They caught the end of the mother dragon's retribution soon enough, but that's none of my concern. A magical creature will serve inherently better than a mundane one, but I have performed this ritual with perfectly normal pig flesh, a few humans, and even a pair of dwarves. This material can be crafted by you, or not. It will simply dictate what form your creation will take. If you do not feel like carving a form for yourself (I understand, sculpting flesh is a hobby with something of an acquired taste), you can always perform a shaping ritual prior, a more basic incantation that can be done with ease; you can find it on page 95. The one caveat being that you should use the dagger you intend to use in this ritual to perform any precursor activity on your vessel. If you intend none, simply make sure it has been exposed to the blood of your soon-to-be-creation before it is performed, for optimal results. Once your material is perfected to your liking, place it within the intercession of circles (as a result of this requirement, your ritual circles should be large enough to accommodate this) and make sure it is placed in a configuration where any initial movement will not cause it injury, as a precaution. With all of this in place, you should be ready for the start of the ritual proper. Gather the blood you wish to use, preferably preserved and not rotten. Pour it or otherwise place it on top of your material, enough that you can use it as a conduit. You should, as such, use blood of a type that you are familiar with. Do not experiment here, lest you wish for catastrophic failure. Once the conduit has been established, ensure you are able to form a link. Perform some kind of small spell through the blood, make an arm of the material twitch, form a brief image in the blood—whatever you desire to ensure you have the connection. Once that is ensured, you must add the final catalyst: Your own blood. A small amount, drawn out via the dagger you have been using. Ensure your blood strikes the material via this method, and then ensure that you are NOT standing within the circle's radius. If you are ... you may lose something you are not prepared to. A reaction should immediately start; once it does, you must perform the final step. Use whatever words you wish—anyone who claims they have a standardized spell is lying—as long as you convey your meaning. Invoke life, invoke the void, and invoke energy. Most importantly, invoke intent. The important part of this is you must use a tongue of man. Do not involve any kind of outer power, lest they take the form and power. Elvish, Dwarvish, Orcish, any will do. The ritual should complete itself from there; the material will become animate, alive. A small figment of your personal power will be lost temporarily; however, it will return in time. It will be as if you have given birth to a child, brought forth a new soul. I would not dwell on the connotations. Those are beyond us. What is within our control is what we do with the power we have.”*

# Waiting for Waiting for Godot

*Ainsley Kalb*

## CAST:

If necessary, genders and accompanying names and pronouns can be changed.  
Specific appearance attributes are unimportant, but general archetypes are given below.

**Bradley:** Jockish.

**Jason:** Bookish.

**Jenna:** Athletic.

**Georgette:** Shy.

**Stanley:** Stoned.

**The Usher:** Desperately trying to appear sophisticated, but badly failing.

## NOTES:

Blank spaces between lines indicate pauses of that many beats.

## SCENE:

*Bradley and Jenna are sitting next to each other in the audience of a black box theatre. Georgette is sitting directly behind them, with a couple of empty seats between her and Jason. The Usher walks Stanley to his seat behind them, then exits.*

**Bradley:** Remind me why we're here again?

**Jenna:** Emma's boyfriend Jack is in it. She made me promise to come see it.

**Bradley:** Does he play Godot?

**Jenna:** I don't know, probably.

**Stanley:** (*shouting to be heard by Bradley and Jenna*) I bet nobody plays Godot. I bet they spend the whole time waiting for him and he never shows up.

*Jason and Georgette exchange looks.*

**Bradley:** Whatever, man. I just hope it's short.

**Jenna:** Brad!

**Bradley:** What?

**Jenna:** Forget it.

*Stanley lights a joint.*

**Georgette:** Excuse me, you can't smoke here!

**Stanley:** Oh, sorry.

*Stanley smokes the joint.*

*Jason turns to Georgette.*

**Jason:** (*whispering*) Thanks for trying.

**Georgette:** (*whispering*) You're welcome.

Do I know you?

Not to be rude.

*Jason chuckles.*

**Jason:** No worries. We've had a couple of lectures together, I think, but we haven't really met. I'm Jason.

**Georgette:** Georgette.

**Stanley:** (*puffing*) Nice to meet you, Georgette! So, what brings you couple here tonight?

**Georgette:** We're not a couple!

**Jason:** I'm here to write a review for the school newspaper.

**Georgette:** That's cool. I'll have to read that later.

**Jason:** That's very kind.

**Stanley:** (*puffing*) I used to write for the news. They kicked me out, though,

**Jason:** (*afraid to ask*) Why?

**Stanley:** Professional jealousy.

And I wrote a how-to guide on making molotovs.

**Georgette:** Oh.

**Bradley:** (*shouting*) Quiet down back there! You're killing the mood.

**Stanley:** (*laughing*) What mood?

**Bradley:** The mood where my dick feels good tonight and yours doesn't get kicked in!

**Stanley:** What if I'm into that?

*Jenna and Jason laugh. Georgette is horrified.*

**Bradley:** What?

**Stanley:** Ask your girl later.

*The Usher walks onstage and turns to face the audience.*

**Usher:** Folks, just a few more minutes until the curtain rises on Westerburg's performance of *Waiting for Godot*!

*The Usher walks back to their post.*

**Bradley:** Hear that, babe? We've got a few minutes...

**Jenna:** After your little "outburst," you'll be lucky if I let you walk me home tonight.

**Bradley:** (*genuinely confused*) But babe, I thought you loved bursting?

*Jason and Stanley bust up laughing. Georgette looks as if her soul is leaving her body.*

**Jenna:** Forget it.

**Bradley:** Forget what?

*Jason notices the look on **Georgette**'s face.*

**Jason:** You okay?

**Georgette:** Me? I'm fine. I'm fine.

**Jason:** You sure?

**Georgette:** (*chuckling*) No.

*Stanley finishes his joint, then slaps **Jason** on the back.*

**Stanley:** Hey buddy, got any?

**Jason:** Any what?

**Stanley:** You know, green?

**Georgette:** Are you asking him for money? Do you two know each other?

**Stanley:** Not yet, but if he plays his cards right! And not money, man. Lettuce.

**Jason:** Lettuce is also slang for money.

**Stanley:** It is? Shit, everything's about money these days. I remember the good old days.

**Jason:** The good old days?

**Stanley:** The good old days. When weed was free and so was love.

**Georgette:** When was this, exactly?

**Stanley:** ... 2007, I think? I did a lot of coke around then. It's kind of a blur.

**Jason:** Wait, you just asked a stranger for marijuana?

**Stanley:** Shh! The cops might hear!

**Jason:** What cops?

**Stanley:** Haven't you seen the play?

**Jason:** No? That's why I'm here?

**Stanley:** It's a classic, man. Gotta see it. Anyway, Pozzo's definitely a cop.

**Jason:** I'll take that under advisement.

**Stanley:** I don't know what that means but it sounds cool.

*Stanley taps **Georgette** on the shoulder.*

**Stanley:** Hey buddy, got any?

**Georgette:** Sorry, fresh out.

**Stanley:** Damn.

**Stanley:** (*shouting*) Hey big guy, got any?

*Bradley stands up and turns around.*

**Bradley:** What did you say to me?

*Jenna grabs Bradley's arm,*

**Jenna:** Brad, don't.

**Bradley:** What did you say to me, loser?

**Stanley:** I just asked if you had any.

**Bradley:** Any what?

**Stanley:** Any.

*Bradley jumps over the chairs to go between Jason and Georgette, who give him space. Jenna screams.*

**Bradley:** Oh, I'll give you some!

**Stanley:** (*with utmost sincerity*) Thanks, man! I guess I was wrong about you.

*The Usher frantically runs to Bradley.*

**Usher:** Please sit down, sir.

*Bradley gives The Usher a death glare, then softens.*

**Bradley:** Sorry.

*Bradley returns to his seat, looks back at Stanley, then sits down.*

**Jenna:** Brad, he was asking if you had pot, not balls.

**Bradley:** Oh shit, really.

*Bradley turns around in his seat.*

**Bradley:** (*shouting*) Sorry man, fresh out!

*Stanley gives a thumbs up. Bradley turns back around and talks indistinctly with Jenna. Jason and Georgette return to their seats.*

**Georgette:** Scary, huh?

**Jason:** Yup.

*Stanley lights another joint.*

**Jason:** Aww crap. I forgot to ask you why you came tonight in all the commotion.

**Georgette:** That's okay.

**Georgette:** Can you keep a secret?



**Jason:** Sure. Totally off the record.

**Georgette:** I hope it'll give me a reason to live.  
Everything's been so hard lately. And theatre can be so inspiring. I used to want to be an actress. My mom told me I wasn't allowed.  
Eventually, I stopped wanting to be an actress.  
I stopped wanting anything I wasn't told to want.  
I stopped feeling anything I wasn't told to feel.  
But theatre is all about letting you feel how you want to feel. Or, how the play wants you to feel.

**Jason:** That's very profound.

**Georgette:** Thanks.

I've just been in this dark hole lately. And it keeps getting deeper. And deeper. And deeper.  
And I feel like I can't stop digging it. The hole is all I have now.  
And maybe this.

Maybe this.

**Stanley:** Shit, that's deep, man. You should, like, write poetry or something.

**Jason:** He's right, you know.

**Georgette:** Maybe.

*Bradley attempts to make out with Jenna.*

**Jenna:** Quit it!

*Jason, Georgette, and Stanley turn to look at Bradley, who does not cease his attempt.*

**Jason:** Back off her, man!

*Bradley does.*

**Bradley:** Fuck this shit, I'm out of here. Hit me up when you're done, babe.

*Bradley exits. Jenna begins crying. Stanley gingerly crawls over the chairs to sit next to her.*

**Stanley:** You okay?

**Jenna:** No.

**Stanley:** Want some?

*Stanley offers the joint.*

**Jenna:** Sure.

*Jenna takes a puff from the joint.*

**Jenna:** Thanks.

**Stanley:** Don't mention it.

*Stanley goes back to his seat.*

*The Usher walks back onstage and turns to face the audience.*

**Usher:** Sorry, folks. It'll just be a few more minutes.

A couple of actors came to blows backstage.

Uh...

Sorry for the delay,

**Stanley:** That's alright, man, it's not your fault.

**Usher:** Thanks.

*The Usher exits.*

**Jenna:** I think I'd better go talk to Bradley.

**Georgette:** Are you sure?

**Jenna:** No. No I'm not.

**Jenna:** Georgette, right?

**Georgette:** Yeah. How do I know you?

Not to be rude.

**Jenna:** You sat in front of me in English 101.

**Georgette:** Oh right. ... Jenna?

**Jenna:** Yup.

How've you been?

**Georgette:** Alright, I guess.

Alright.

**Stanley:** She's a real poet.

**Jason:** Don't butt in, dude.

**Jenna:** You're a poet?

**Georgette:** He just says that because of something I said earlier. I'm not literally a poet.

**Jenna:** Oh

I like poetry.

**Georgette:** Sorry.

**Jenna:** Nothing to be sorry for.

**Georgette:** Oh.

*The Usher returns.*

**Usher:** Just another couple of minutes, folks. Ice packs are actively being applied, so we should be good to go soon.

*Stanley gives a thumbs up. The Usher exits without acknowledging it.*

**Georgette:** Sometimes it feels like life just goes on forever.

No purpose. No point.

Just... continuance. Contiguity? Continuessness?

**Stanley:** You had it right the first time.

**Georgette:** Thanks.

**Stanley:** Want any?

*Stanley offers her his joint.*

**Georgette:** No, thanks.

I think I'm good.

*The Usher returns, and opens their mouth to speak.*

# MEDUSA

*Tamryn Herring*

Guardian, protectress, mortal gorgon queen.

Though she was vilified  
her innocence stolen  
her name spat upon for all time  
instead of beauty beholden  
there are still women who  
refuse to let this be her legacy.

They chant Medusa like an  
incantation so that we never forget  
and wear survivor at their throats  
instead of tragedy.

They honor her by swearing  
away any and all rationales to  
her cruel fate.

They snap seductress  
and liar and drama queen  
in half and forge them into daggers  
bonded with the blood of every woman who was ever  
shunned or silenced or not believed.

For there is nothing  
more powerful  
than women whispering  
strength into each other's marrow.



# Worlds Garden Pot

*Juliam Stokes*

Sculpture

# Mountain Suele

*Claire Duda*

I open my eyes as the rising sun pierces them. I don't remember much from last night, but I know that it was not restful. I haven't been able to rest for months, not really anyway. Sure, I sleep, but that's not the same as rest now, is it? That's what happens when you're alone, when you feel this sense of longing for something but you don't even know that it exists anymore. I want to rest, but how can I when each time I close my eyes, I'm distinctly aware that I'm out here on my own, nobody but my own thoughts to keep me company, nobody but my own will to keep me going, and nobody but my strength to keep me alive.

I wipe the last of my restless sleep off my face, sticky with the lack of true rest. And I look up remembering the sight of the mountain before me, why I chose to come here. It's majestic, beautiful and intimidating all at once, bringing me a sense of peace; maybe I'll find what I've been chasing here. I know I need to get up, face the day and the mountain, so I roll over and hoist myself into a standing position. I pick up my backpack, put one foot in front of the other and start down, or rather up, the path.

Left, right, left, right, left, right, left, right, left, right, left, right, left, right, right, left, right, left, right, left, droit, gauche, droit, gauche, droit, left, right, left, right, left, right, left, right, left, right, left, right, left, right, gauche. Breathe, drink some water. Continue. Left, right, left, right, left, right. Play a song in my head. "Climb every mountain, ford every stream, these are a few of my favorite things." But are they MY favorite things? Wild geese especially aren't good. Those guys are scary. Why would Maria include that? Uneasy now at the inclusion of geese in a list of favorite things and thinking perhaps Maria is delusional, I look back to see how far I've come.

I know I'm feeling uneasy already (see the aforementioned loneliness and wild geese being a favorite of a demure nun-turned-governess), but I'm still shocked by what I see. And no, I'm not talking about the majesty of the mountains; they're great, but they don't unsettle me in the way what I'm looking at now on the path

behind me does. It's a cloaked figure, and although I can't see its face, it seems to stare not only at me but through me to my very core. Et je commence à penser not only in English mais en français aussi.

What is this?

“Qu'est-ce que c'est ?” A voice that's not mine echoes within my head. My only conclusion is that it must be this figure behind me. Je marche encore, speeding up until I'm nearly jogging as I try to quitter the creature I left behind me.

Droit, gauche, droit, gauche, right, left. It's all I can bear to think about as I stumble up the mountain. I feel tears form. Afterall, this creature, c'est la seule personne que j'ai vue depuis des mois. Am I scared of people now? Do I even want to return to my previous life before I came here?

N'importe though, because je vois un restaurant up ahead of me. I must be getting close to the top, and peut-être ils peuvent m'aider à apprendre qui est cette figure qui me suit.

“Do you know about the hooded figure I saw following me earlier?”

“Wir sprechen kein Englisch.”

— Est-ce que vous connaissez la figure qui me suit ?

— Wir sprechen kein Französisch. Nur Deutsch sprechen wir.

— Hilfe bitte. Ich habe ein geist gesehen.

As I utter this last phrase, a fog covers the room. Et j'entends la voix encore. Il n'est plus une figure et ce me fait peur beaucoup plus qu'avant. Rien ne peut l'arrêter s'il n'a pas un corps comme celui d'une personne.

— Viens avec moi, dit la voix. Je te propose la sécurité et la fin de ton solitude. Deviens comme moi. Voyage sur le vent. N'aie pas peur ; je te protégerai toujours.

— NON ! Je crie. Vous comprenez pas. Vous me ferrez peur toujours. Quand on est seul, on a toujours au moins un peu peur. Je vous dis adieu.

Je cours. Parce que c'est la seule option possible à ce moment. Je cours et je cours et je cours. Gauche, droit, gauche, droit, gauche, droit, gauche. Je me sentis le vent et je sais pas s'il m'aide ou s'il veut me retourner au restaurant et au monstre que j'ai vu là. Je décide que le monstre doit avoir un nom. Peut-être j'aurai moins peur si je l'appelle « Pumpernickel. »

Oui, c'est bon ça. Pumpernickel. What a trickster that guy is. Ou je devrais dire que ce mec est un « trickster » mais aussi ce type de pain est comme ça. C'est pourquoi c'est le nom parfait. Droit, gauche, droit, gauche, rechte, linke, right, left, rechte, left, droit, linke. Pumpernickel, tu n'es pas mon ami. Et oui, je t'ai tutoyé



parce que je ne te respecte pas.

Haaa...haaa...haaa...in....out...in....out...je suis proche...almost....almost... nearly... there...the top. Je suis le roi. Je suis la reine. Où es-tu maintenant Pumpernickel ? Je gagne.

But then the wind comes and with it a whisper.

— Tu gagnes, mais qu'est-ce que tu gagnes ? Liberté de moi, de ta solitude ? Je suis ici aussi et tu restes seule.

— Toujours, je te refuse. J'ai encore des projets. Au moins, je dois compléter ce chemin et descendre cette montagne. Une fois plus, adieu.

— D'accord. Tu me quittes une troisième fois. Nous sommes finis après ça...

— Bon.

— MAIS, comme je suis tellement gentil, je te donne une dernière chance.

— Et je dis non. Adieu Pumpernickel.

Sa réponse de « ce n'est pas mon nom » est perdue sur le vent lorsque je continue mon descente. Je respire plus facilement. And I start to think more clearly. Gauche, droit, gauche, droit, left, right, left, right, left, left.

J'ai échappé. Je suis libre. J'AI ECHAPPE ! JE SUIS LIBRE ! Même si je suis seule, je ne suis plus lonely. I've escaped! I'm going home! Where is home? No, actually. Please tell me. I'm lost. It's okay. I'm lost. Just go down. I'm lost. No, you're not; just go down. Who are you?

I'm stumbling. Tears are falling. From fear? Relief? Sadness? I don't know. I fall. I feel the embrace of the Earth as I tumble, down, down, down, into the waiting arms of my mother. I'm home, and I'll never again be alone.

# Mountain Seule (Translated)

*Claire Duda*

I open my eyes as the rising sun pierces them. I don't remember much from last night, but I know that it was not restful. I haven't been able to rest for months, not really anyway. Sure, I sleep, but that's not the same as rest now, is it? That's what happens when you're alone, when you feel this sense of longing for something but you don't even know that it exists anymore. I want to rest, but how can I when each time I close my eyes, I'm distinctly aware that I'm out here on my own, nobody but my own thoughts to keep me company, nobody but my own will to keep me going, and nobody but my strength to keep me alive.

I wipe the last of my restless sleep off my face, sticky with the lack of true rest. And I look up remembering at the sight of the mountain before me, why I chose to come here. It's majestic, beautiful and intimidating all at once, bringing me a sense of peace; maybe I'll find what I've been chasing here. I know I need to get up, face the day and the mountain, so I roll over and hoist myself into a standing position. I pick up my backpack, put one foot in front of the other and start down, or rather up, the path.

Left, right, left, right, left, right, left, right, left, right, left, right, left, right, right, left, right, left, right, left, *right, left, right, left, right*, left, right, left, right, left, right, left, right, left, right, left, right, left, right, left, right, *left*. Breath, drink some water. Continue. Left, right, left, right, left, right. Play a song in my head. "Climb every mountain, ford every stream, these are a few of my favorite things." But are they MY favorite things? Wild geese especially aren't good. Those guys are scary. Why would Maria include that? Uneasy now at the inclusion of geese in a list of favorite things and thinking perhaps Maria is delusional, I look back to see how far I've come.

I know I'm feeling uneasy already (see the aforementioned loneliness and wild geese being a favorite of a demure nun-turned-governess), but I'm still shocked by what I see. And no, I'm not talking about the majesty of the mountains; they're great, but they don't unsettle me in the way what I'm looking at now on the path

behind me does. It's a cloaked figure, and although I can't see its face, it seems to stare not only at me but through me to my very core. *And I begin to think not only in English but in French also.*

What is this?

*"What is this that this is?"* A voice that's not mine echoes within my head. My only conclusion is that it must be this figure behind me. *I walk again*, speeding up until I'm nearly jogging as I try to quit the creature I left behind me.

*Right, left, right, left, right, left.* It's all I can bear to think about as I stumble up the mountain. I feel tears form. After all, this creature, *this is the only person that I have seen since some months.* Am I scared of people now? Do I even want to return to my previous life before I came here?

*Not anything* though, because *I see a restaurant* up ahead of me. I must be getting close to the top, *and maybe they can me aid to learn who is this figure who me follows.*

"Do you know about the hooded figure I saw following me earlier?"

**"We speak no English."**

— *Is this that you know the figure who me follows?*

— **We speak no French. Only German speak we.**

— **Help please. I have a ghost seen.**

As I utter this last phrase, a fog covers the room. *And I hear the voice again. He is no longer a figure and this me makes fear a lot more than before. Nothing can him stop if he has not a body like that of a person.*

— *Come with me, says the voice. I thee propose the security and the end of thy solitude. Become like me. Travel on the wind. Have not fear; I thee will protect always.*

— *NO! I yell. You understand not. You me will make fear always. When one is alone, one has always at the least a little fear. I you say godspeed.*

*I run. Because this is the only option possible at this moment. I run and I run and I run. Left, right, left, right, left, right, left. I myself feel the wind and I know not if he me aids or if he wants me to return to the restaurant and to the monster that I have seen there. I decide that the monster must have a name. Maybe I will have less fear if I it call « Pumpernickel. »*

*Yes, this is good this. Pumpernickel. What a trickster that guy is. Or I should say that this guy is a « trickster » but also this type of bread is like this. This is why this is the name perfect. Right, left, right, left, **right, left, right, left, right, left, left.** Pumpernickel, thou art not my friend. And yes, I thee have called "thou" because I thee respect not.*

Haaa...haaa...haaa...in....out...in....out...I am close...almost...almost...nearly... there...the top. *I am the king. I am the queen. Where art thou now Pumpernickel? I win.*

But then the wind comes and with it a whisper.

— *Thou winnest, but what is this that thou winnest ? Liberty from me, from thy solitude ? I am here also and thou retest alone.*

— *Always, I thee refuse. I have again of the projects. At the least, I must complete this path and descend this mountain. One time more, godspeed.*

— *Alright. Thou me quittest a third time. We are finished after this...*

— *Good.*

— *BUT, as I am so kind, I thee give a last chance.*

— *And I say no. Godspeed Pumpernickel.*

*His response of « this is not my name » is lost on the wind while I continue my descent. I breathe more easily. And I start to think more clearly. Left, right, left, right, left, right, left, right, left.*

*I have escaped. I am free. I HAVE ESCAPED! I AM FREE! Even if I am alone, I am no longer lonely. I've escaped! I'm going home! Where is home? No, actually. Please tell me. I'm lost. It's okay. I'm lost. Just go down. I'm lost. No, you're not; just go down. Who are you?*

I'm stumbling. Tears are falling. From fear? Relief? Sadness? I don't know. I fall. I feel the embrace of the Earth as I tumble, down, down, down, into the waiting arms of my mother. I'm home, and I'll never again be alone.

# Sunny Days and Stormy Nights

*Abram Greene*

When the door closes to your home  
There are still thunderstorms to face  
From bills to pay  
To the little ones needing grace  
When the storm clouds show up outside  
People run inside  
But when storm clouds show up inside  
Why don't people run outside  
And now you're soaked with tears  
And need to be repaired  
You're perplexed  
But not in despair  
Beware of feeling lonely  
Like you're glued to a cage  
Find community  
And be engaged  
Surround yourself with roses  
And move away from the weeds  
That way you can bloom and blossom  
With super speed



# Ivory-billed Woodpecker

*Julian Stokes*

Reduction

# Shifting Weight

*Clara Fuebler*

Maren hated therapy almost as much as Daniel. And Daniel hated therapy a lot. When Maren was little, a woman in her 40's had sealed this fate for her by setting a box of Mr. Sketch scented markers on a small acrylic table and asking her to draw her parents divorce.

Maren hated the smell of those markers and that woman and hated the thought of baring her soul to anyone, much less a stranger with graying hair and a forced smile. But more than these things Maren hated divorce, and so 20 years later, she sits now in this office chair, Ikea's take on mid-century modern, next to her husband who has decided he doesn't love her anymore.

But Daniel didn't love anything. Maren knew this and it is why she married him. Actually Daniel did love Lisa, his family dog born weeks before him, a German shepherd that passed nine years prior, but that was it. Maren knew that Daniel did not really love her—but what she did not know was that that mattered to him.

When Maren had walked out of therapy the first time after calling that “very nice woman” who her mom “had spent a lot of money for her to talk to” a very powerful word that her dad used when he wanted Mom to go hang out in the bathroom a while (“cunt”), Maren felt almost as powerful as her dad. She still had never had so much control. But Maren had felt bad about wasting her mom's money, even though she must have had a lot (she always carried lots of cash), and so she never went back to that “very nice lady's” office and never discussed her parents' divorce. Maren remembered trying to keep her feet from skipping as she walked hand in hand with her mother back to their car. She had learned that day that she could use her words and get what she wanted. But now, sitting across from this “very nice lady,” she could not.

It was very frustrating for Maren that, a decade into her marriage, Daniel was just now learning he didn't know how to love but, more importantly, that he had decided to share this with her. This was not news to Maren and, in fact, it is what she preferred. Their lives fit together in perfect tandem. They would enjoy the same



parties. Laugh at the same jokes. Mock the same people and places. Daniel would never cheat on her because he didn't want a muse; Daniel wanted a friend. Because of this Maren would never have to get divorced. A win-win. All of this Maren had decided when he had sat on the concrete steps of their apartment building eleven years earlier, the night he decided to get sober. He asked her to marry him. He was crying. She wouldn't get a ring until much later, but she would get a white chip, the first of many, which she still had. He wouldn't have to give that one back, his first, when he started drinking again because it was tucked away in a jewelry box she kept in the top of her closet. His promise to her.

The second time he earned that chip he'd keep it for himself.

"I guess I just thought it wasn't an issue, Daniel," she said.

Maren didn't know whether to face him or the woman, and it was all very awkward. He was crying which she had only seen him do three times. Him crying in front of this stranger made her jealous. And as she witnessed his tears she thought of the times she had seen them before: when he proposed, when Lisa died, her miscarriage. "Four times now" she thought to herself. Maren cried all the time. His tears were more important.

"I wanted to love you," Daniel said.

"But I don't. Not anymore."

And now that it was not unspoken, the secret of their marriage, their love, now reduced to this woman's notes, Maren felt naked. Like the days after she lost her virginity to that son of a bitch "artist" way too young or when Daniel had called her a cunt. It felt better to say it than hear it, she'd determined.

"It doesn't matter to me," she said, trying very hard not to make her voice crack.

"We are alike."

She looked at Daniel now. Really looked at him. Looked at the line of his chin and his sad eyes looking at the boots he had asked for for christmas, the freckles on his knuckles she used to kiss. The scars on his arms. He met her eyes. Behind those long eyelashes she had once whispered to him that she hoped their little girl would have, there was a look of defeat she would remember when she tried to fight for her marriage. Fight for him. She had already lost and they both knew it.

This moment, twelve years of loss and love and likeness, defined in this moment the therapist would not notice.

Maren and Daniel, embarrassed by the weight of it all, shifted their bodies away



from each other to face of a woman whose name neither of them knew, no doubt looking expectantly for wisdom they could find in each other.

The therapist, like a well trained actress, took the cue. She smiled softly and let out a sigh they wouldn't have heard had the silence not been so damn loud.

"Have you thought about trying for another baby?" she said calmly.

Cunt.

# Nothing is Not Haunted

*Eli Basset*

Even at the wizened age of 15, the memory of that day remained planted in the dog's mind. He was still unsure why that day had happened to him, specifically—he was only a dog, after all. Yet it had happened, so many years ago when he was young and living in his first home in the suburbs ...

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The dog lived in a quaint little cottage he'd bought from a friend about two years back. It was situated just north of the city in the suburb of Scary, which he'd grown quite fond of—the quiet streets, the fresh air, the nice neighbors, the neat rows of old houses. There were plenty of squirrels and even a toy shop down the road. Fire hydrants stood on every corner, with spreading oak trees towering over them. He took walks every day, sometimes twice—you know how dogs are. His only regret was that the house across the street blocked his view of the sunset, but there was a field a mile or so down the road where many a time the dog had watched the trees turn to gold as night closed in.

Naturally, it had happened on a Monday. This particular dog was out walking on this particular afternoon (his second walk that day) and had let himself off leash for the time being when he saw a flicker of movement near the old gas station, long since abandoned. (Dogs have little use for gasoline—much as they enjoy riding in cars, they never did grow accustomed to driving them. A loss, for sure, but as they say, you can't chew two bones at once). He turned quickly enough to catch a glimpse of a tail vanishing into the dark beyond the station's shattered glass door. A *cat's* tail. He could smell it. The dog stopped and tipped his head to the side. There were hardly any cats in the area; the HOA had made certain of that. What could it be doing there?

The thought haunted him for the rest of the day, until that evening, as the curtain of night swept aside the light of the sun, he heard a knock on the door. It startled the dog, for he didn't get many visitors. In fact, he hadn't had any in the last two years or so.

He answered—peering out the window first, looking surprised, then trotting over to the door and pushing it open. (Dog doors are bereft of door knobs, the main reason being dogs’ lack of opposable thumbs. Some have knockers, but for decoration only). On the doormat was a cat, glowering like only a cat can glower. Both its ears were torn, its black-and-white fur was matted, and it had an impressive scar on its nose, as if its body had been assembled in a hurry and the final details glossed over. But the cat’s most striking features were its eyes, dark and deep, which disturbed the dog ever so slightly.

“Why, hello!” the dog said politely. “I wasn’t expecting anyone, but you are welcome nonetheless. Do come in.”

The cat obliged, looking with disdain at the decor. (Dog fashion isn’t known for its charm, despite that being its whole point. Cats are usually eager to say as much, but not so with this cat—she was much too serious). The cat settled down on the sofa and the dog put on some tea. He thought about offering biscuits, too, but the only ones he had were bone-shaped, and he thought the cat might take offense to that. Besides, he couldn’t afford to be *too* nice—what would the neighbors say if they found out he, a respectable member of the community, had willingly offered a *cat* biscuits? He shoved the tin back in its cupboard.

Unsurprisingly, when the dog reentered the living room, he found that the cat had taken a different seat. The dog guessed, correctly, that the cat had tried all of the chairs in the room while he’d been gone, seeking out the most comfortable spot. The cat appeared unsatisfied with the options, settling for her original spot on the sofa with an overt look in the dog’s direction.

The dog sat down on the other side of the coffee table. “So! What’s your name?” he asked.

“How long have you lived here?” the cat replied in a melodious purr that didn’t match her ragged features. The dog, caught off guard, was slow to respond and had to think about his answer.

“Uh ... about two years, now, I think,” he said, scratching his head. “But if you don’t mind me asking—”

“Two years!” the cat interrupted. “I thought as much.” She did not continue. “Uh, yes,” the dog said. “I quite like it here. Takes a while to get to work, but still, it’s a nice walk.”

“Mmm,” the cat murmured, again looking disdainfully around the room. “I see.” The dog thought this was all very peculiar and decided to clear things up. “Pardon

me for asking,” he said, “but I still don’t know who you are. I don’t get many guests, especially cats. What are you doing around here?”

The cat turned her penetrating gaze on the dog. She looked like she was about to answer, but decided not to in favor of continuing to stare at the dog. The dog found himself wishing the kettle would boil soon.

“Well, it’s okay if you don’t want to tell me,” he tried again. “Still, it would be nice to know *something*.”

“All you need to know,” the cat finally said, “is that I am not here to harm you. I am here to awaken you. Do not be worried.”

“Ah,” the dog replied, suddenly very worried. “So this is like a religious thing?”

“Not exactly,” the cat replied. “It’s complicated. But I will do my best to explain.”

“Uh...” the dog muttered.

“You’ve lived here for two years—not bad, I’ll say, for a dog. You lasted longer than the rest, anyway. Much longer.”

The dog shook himself and tried desperately to organize his thoughts. “What do you mean?” he asked. “I don’t understand.”

“I knew you’d say that,” the cat answered with a sigh.

“You did? Are you psychic?” the dog asked, very much impressed.

“No! Of course not! I just *guessed* that’s what you’d say, given what I’ve heard before, with the other dogs.”

“Oh,” the dog said. “I see.” There was a pause. “Actually, I don’t really,” he began again. “What do you mean, other dogs?”

The cat sat up in her chair. The dog couldn’t take his eyes off the flicking tail. “Let me guess,” began the cat. “You like this place because of the quiet, the serenity, the peace, something like that?”

“Why, yes!” replied the dog, sure now that the cat couldn’t *not* be psychic.

“Have you ever considered why it’s so peaceful?”

The dog tilted his head to the side and thought. “Well, no, I suppose not,” he said. “It seems like lots of dogs would want to live here, because it’s so peaceful. But then it wouldn’t be peaceful anymore.”

“Exactly!” said the cat, her persistent glower lightening slightly. “You are unique, it seems, different from the rest.” The glower returned. “You might be stronger, then, as well ... we shall see.” The cat scowled at nothing as she stood up and stretched with a yawn, then returned her attention to the puzzled dog.

“Now, get ready,” she said. “This may hurt.”

The dog, who was quite naturally averse to pain of any sort, wasn't happy to hear this. "Uh, I'd rather not—actually I just thought of something I've got to do right now, so if you'd please excuse me for just a minute—"

But alas, it was too late for the dog. The cat twitched once, then lifted off the sofa, smoke writhing around it, its outline fading into shadow. Its eyes began to glow and it turned wraithlike as a howling wind threw books and picture frames around the room like debris in a storm. Vases shattered against the walls, caught in the maelstrom. In the center of the chaos hung the cat, who in a sudden surge glided towards the dog and swooped right into his petrified body.

The dog howled. He writhed and struggled as the cat worked inside him, cold smoke drifting into his blood, his marrow, the very neurons of his brain, until everything went black.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

When the dog woke up, the cat was sprawled on the sofa, licking a paw and looking thoroughly nonchalant. The dog shivered when he saw the swishing tail—the cat smell wouldn't go away by itself, he thought; he'd have to wash those cushions as soon as the cat left.

*No water to wash them with*, his brain told itself. *No soap, either*. And then the realization swept over him, the terrible realization, the could-not-be realization ... "No," the dog said, and ran outside. And what he saw was far from the serene suburb he had thought he lived in. It was quiet, but only because the houses were caved in, the trees burned to ashes, the streets cracked and rubble scattered everywhere. The house across from the dog was replaced by a shallow crater, and he realized he could see the sunset through the empty space. The dog looked frantically left and right and realized his own house was the only one still standing on the street, though it wasn't looking good—the bricks were cracked, windows shattered, roof torn away, gutters hanging off screws or gone altogether. There were no neighbors. No squirrels ran across the barren ground. Weeds filled the cracks in the pavement not covered by debris.

"So now you see?" the cat said, the soft purr suddenly loud behind him. The dog didn't answer. "It's a miracle you've managed to live here so long, even more so that you survived at all. The illusion hit you pretty hard."

"The illusion?" the dog asked. For he saw now that that was what his entire life

was—an illusion. He didn't have a job. He had no money, no friends, not even a water bowl. His house looked as if it had been abandoned for years. The very disturbing thought came to him that his food supply had run out the day before. His paws hurt—how many times had he walked on that debris-ridden road?

“How did this happen?” he whispered. “How was I so stupid—?”

“Not stupid,” said the cat. “Illusions just are what they are—illusions. How were you supposed to know?”

“Yeah, but ... still ... this is *impossible*.”

“Not impossible,” the cat purred. “That’s where cats come in. We know that in war, nothing is not haunted.” And with that, the cat faded away into smoke, leaving the dog standing alone on the ragged, moldy welcome mat.

The empty tea kettle began whistling.

# Trees

*Iris Newlin*

Back when the world was younger  
but the wars were still long,  
I worked the fields at the edge of the great woods  
with my family—a mother, a father, a little brother.  
Da had a light in his eyes like a setting sun,  
and he liked to laugh and sing. Ma had a good head  
on her shoulders and a good heart.  
My brother would pull my hair and cry  
when I whacked him for it.  
In the summer before the harvest came in,  
wheat and cabbage, cabbage and beans,  
I'd convince him to run off into the woods with me  
and we'd stay there, throwing sticks and telling stories, until dusk,  
until our father got back in from town.  
Ma got antsy before the harvest came in,  
and she was liable to go after us.

Da would tell stories of forest witches,  
with long sharp teeth and skeleton hands,  
leaves in their hair. My brother was terrified,  
and couldn't stay in the forest for very long.  
I tried to keep the company of the trees  
as long as I could. Ma didn't come looking for us  
if we kept quiet. Still, I'd find myself always looking  
over my shoulder, after watching him look over his  
all afternoon.

Da joined the soldiers one spring, and all  
through the summer he was gone with them,

marching up hills and down hills and over rivers.  
I missed him. Ma was more antsy with him gone,  
with no one to help bring the harvest in but us.  
Beans, cabbage, wheat. We let the plums rot.  
It didn't matter by autumn, because the wars  
brought all the soldiers back. They did a lot of marching  
through our fields, until our harvest  
was mud on their boots.  
They did a lot of dying, too.  
And some came through our house stealing bread  
and eggs and honey from our jar.  
Da came home with a fever, but he didn't stay long, and we had to bury him  
at the edge of the turnip field.

Some time passed, I guess. I couldn't tell.  
Ma told us to shut up about being hungry,  
so we did. Then she told us to shut up.  
My brother and I on his bed, telling stories,  
tearing our bread into smaller and smaller pieces.  
Ma grabbed us one morning and said we were going  
into the woods, as far in as we could,  
to look for some goddamn food, and I said  
sounds good but my brother started crying  
about the witches and Ma told him  
to shut up about witches and all this time  
we're passing so many trees. Long, tall,  
bony-fingered ladies, leaves in their hair.  
Sun rolls off them like butter on gingerbread.  
My mother's teeth are long and sharp.  
Still, I kept looking over my shoulder, behind  
rocks and trees, for something massive,  
the wolves, soldiers or witches I thought could be following us.  
My brother kept looking back too. He told me later  
it was to remember the way home.



# In The Grassy Field

*Kindra Mancini*

Ahead of us, the wind rustles the few leaves left on the tree. My ankle pops underneath me when I stumble on a rock, but I don't care about that.

"I'm telling you," Maddie says, sweet, gentle, in the same way a doe nudges her fawn to its feet. "There are ghosts out here. I know it."

"You know it?" I ask. I don't believe her, and she knows I don't believe her, but I've followed her out here anyway. I still walk just a pace behind her, our hands linked by two fingers, my shoes fitting into the indents of crushed grass left behind by her bare feet. When we'd left, I'd been worried she'd hurt her feet on something sharp out here in this field. She'd stomped down on a piece of glass as if to prove me wrong, and there hadn't been even a cut on the skin of her foot when she picked it up to show it to me. Despite my desire for her to at least put on sandals, she'd still refused.

"Course I know it," she teases.

She knows I'm wrapped around her finger—knows I'll do anything she asks of me because she's all that I have. Sometimes I hate her for the way that she twists my arteries around her bony knuckles; how she squeezes them until they burst and bleed all over her calloused hands. She lathers until I've bubbled into a coppery, pink foam, and then she rinses me down the drain. She discards me like I am nothing.

But here and now, tugged behind her radiant glow by the gentlest of hands, I would follow her to the ends of the earth. She knows of my love for her, and I know she doesn't return it, but we exist in this field together anyway. We breathe the same air, and we love each other in our own ways, and that's all I could ever ask for.

"You know they said that guy from our high school hung his girlfriend out here last month," Maddie says. She's stopped in her journey across the field, and I have to stumble to the side to avoid crushing her heel with the toe of my boot. I nearly lose her hand in the process, but I grapple for it until our fingers are linked once more.

"God, yeah. I'm glad the police got him," I say. "I used to be friends with her

before ... that. Best friends. And it's hanged, not hung."

"That makes the sentence sound stupid, though."

"Hey, I don't make the rules about this stuff. I just know them."

Maddie hums, and she turns to look at the only tree that could support a body. She drops my hand to hold her fingers up in a rectangle as if she's capturing a picture, and she nods to herself. When she stops, she doesn't grab my hand again. "Were you guys only best friends?"

I'm shocked for a moment, and I lean around her in hopes of getting a look at her expression, just to see if my sudden hope is unfounded, but her hair is blocking her face. She's still staring at the tree. "I mean, I knew she wasn't into girls, and I'd rather have had her as a friend than nothing at all."

"Like how you feel about me," she continues. A bitter lump forms in my throat at the blatant ignorance of the fragile peace we'd established when she confronted me about my feelings the first time. Before I can say anything, though, she starts walking toward another place in the field. "I bet the ghost is over here somewhere."

She's doing that thing where she disregards the climbing uncertainty of what to do with the elephant in the room. She's been doing this since we were kids; when she would break something and tell her mom it was me so she wouldn't get in trouble. I'd try to get her to apologize for it, but she'd pretend it never happened. I always hated her for that.

"How do you even know there's a ghost over here?" I ask. I follow her anyway. I drop the last subject just like she did. "And what happened to 'ghosts'? There's just one now?"

"Yeah," she answers. She sounds like she's not all there. "Just one."

I follow her until she stops in a path of flattened dirt just at the edge of a tree line. The winter sun is starting to set behind us, and I tug my jacket tighter around myself.

"It's going to get dark soon. We should probably get home before it gets too cold," I say. I take a second to look at her a little harder. Not only is she not wearing shoes, but she isn't wearing a jacket, either.

Maddie stares down at the patch of dirt behind a curtain of her hair. I follow her gaze until I'm looking at the dirt, too.

"You should tell them I'm here," she whispers. It's as if she's being choked.

There is only one shadow across the patch of dirt. It's mine.

# Phone Calls

*Sarah Wiseman*

I walked around the living room deciding if I should dive into my habit or not. I've been doing it almost every day since, calling and waiting for someone to pick up. Someone never will, but it's worth a shot anyway. Can phones last this long? Surely not. Electricity went out days after it all happened. And only a few people, of the ones left, have solar panels. Luckily for me, I had them installed a few days before. I had a hunch and after everything I saw on the news, I wasn't taking that risk.

I should

I shouldn't

But what if today is the day?

I suck in a deep breath. "Nope."

My voice is hoarse since there's no one to talk to. The apocalypse was about 20 years ago, but I had a group. We hid out at my house since I had solar and we had a garden, started families; we were a community. They went to look for others about six months ago. Either they found what they were looking for and didn't care to share. Or they are dead. The ones that stayed couldn't stay long. They became overwhelmed with waiting and went out on their own. I found their bodies soon after that behind the house. They didn't make it that far.

I need to call. Just get it over with. My cell phone died years ago, but my wall phone is alive and well. Back in the kitchen I lean on the dirty rust-colored cabinet and pick up the phone. I need to go through my usual list.

Robert: (858) 761-3647

"Hey, it's Bob, sorry-"

Michelle: (746) 378-9080

"You've reached Michelle a.k.a me! -"

Winston: (858) 268-3484

"It's Winnie! I'll call you bac-"

And so on and so forth. Ten more calls later and no answer. Now, I try the one that hurts the most. My ex-husband Derrick. He was living here with his wife until

he left with the group. He knew I would be prepared, so he brought his new family to my (what used to be our) home. I told him not to waste my energy by charging his cell, now my biggest hope is that he picks up.

Derrick: (858) 442-6720

I can feel the sweat dripping down my back. The marble of the cabinet digs into my hip and I can feel it leaving a mark. My fingers squeeze around the phone as I stare at the number panel in front of me. I should hang up because he won't answer. He's happier somewhere else or dead. My heart beats out of my chest and I'm scared that if I look down, I could see the rapid thump in my chest. On the sixth ring, I give up.

I'm about to hang up when I hear, "Hello? Please, Hello?"

There's no way. Absolutely no way.

"Jess, I ... please beg you."

I bring the phone back to my ear and hit myself in the process, "I'm here."

I hear a sigh on the other end. "Thank you," but I get the sense he's not talking to me.

"Where are you all? It's just me again. They got them."

"I found a place, but it seems we are both alone."

"Huh?"

Oh.

*Oh.*

"I'm so sorry, Derrick."

I hear rustling, knowing it's from him rubbing his shaggy blond hair. "No worries. It happened months ago. The grief process changes when the world ends."

"You still didn't answer my question. Where are you?"

The line goes silent. "Vermont."

"You walked all the way to Vermont?"

"Listen, I know, but there's a place here. Tons of people. There's electricity and water. Heat."

I roll my eyes. The only reason he said that is because I hate the cold and would never go to Vermont.

"I have all that here."

"Please, Jessica. You're all that I have left. Plus, you need to be here too. You can't be alone for the rest of your life. The solar and the well will run out eventually. Here it won't. Jess, please. Come on."

“Fine, I’ll meet you. But at the first sign of trouble, I’m coming back here.”

“Okay, make sure you pack light. I’ll call you later with directions. Please answer,” then he hangs up.

I guess I’m going to Vermont.



# ReB Whales

*Julian Stokes*

Multi-Block Print

# Sound Waves and Other Dark Machinations

*Iris Newlin*

When Erwin left planetside for school, their father gave them an old viola he used to practice on. “Of course, I never got as good as you,” he laughed, and Erwin winced at the compliment but grinned back. It was fun to practice on the shuttle ride over and in the common areas of their residence halls. It was bigger than the violin, and hard to get a clear tone out of, and they could make their suitemates laugh by playing it intentionally badly. The trouble came when they volunteered to play it for the satellite university’s beginners’ orchestra. For once, it wasn’t the music; Erwin had a history of freezing up instead of practicing, an unfortunate habit for a violin performance major. Unfortunate, they assured themselves, but nothing they couldn’t work through. The beginner viola music was simple enough to play by ear. The trouble was that Erwin was certain the viola was cursed.

Now, Erwin had never been offworld before, so there were all sorts of things to worry about apart from their chronic procrastination. Their father had a deep unspoken worry about the structural integrity of the satellite, which was ridiculous because of the statistical improbability of hull breaches. Their grandmother had a very vocal fear of attacks by the vampires that had made the journey to outer space to get away from the sun and now flew between the stars on giant bat wings, which was ridiculous if you put any stock in the structural integrity of the satellite. But the curse was what worried Erwin at first. And it was something they realized they actually had good odds of addressing, or at least of naming as a convenient scapegoat.

“It talks to me when I’m playing it,” they complained to their violin instructor. “And sometimes I hear it across the room while I’m practicing violin. It keeps telling me to look for somebody.”

“Sounds like a curse all right,” said their teacher, Gideon Farris. “If it’s impacting your studies, I’d recommend renting a new one from the conservatory. Wait, you aren’t even taking viola lessons, are you? Yeah, I’d get rid of it.” But Erwin was getting one extra credit for volunteering in the beginners’ orchestra, and they knew if they quit they’d lose that feeling of being the most competent player in a section.

It was stupid; they'd promised themselves they weren't like the first violinists at their high school who'd lose it over seating charts and auditions, but it was really nice, to feel good about making music.

Not even halfway through the first trimester, Erwin was lying awake daydreaming about dropping out.

Their teacher told the conductors of each orchestra level Erwin's college provided. "My, *my*!" said Owls Eldower, the conductor of the intermediate orchestra. "A curse? How invariably special! Do let me know if anything interesting comes of it!" Alicia Callifer, the advanced orchestra's conductor, didn't say anything but did begin approaching Erwin in the halls with questions about their technique, their practicing, their favorite pieces. The head of the department, Dr. Tolliver Coriolane, even joined in on some of Ms. Callifer's questions. Erwin got the feeling that all three of them had met with their violin teacher and their academic advisor. The cursed viola wasn't working as an excuse, it was just attracting attention.

Erwin had a thing for spaceships and satellites. They really liked the idea of being inside something big. They imagined it would feel the way they felt in orchestra concerts sometimes, both uplifted and held, whenever they'd put their ear to the ground and listen to it humming with machinery. It would be like when their dad took them to their first orchestra concert and they hadn't been able to close their mouth, imagining the power behind that enormous sound breaking over them in waves. But living on the satellite was just overwhelming. Student housing and the conservatory were on opposite sides of the university level, right next to the layer of barriers and escape pods that made up the outside wall. Struggling back and forth between them, hugging unfamiliar sheet music to their ribs, was giving them far too much time to think.

Erwin was good at taking things in stride (or, rather, they were good at ignoring the weird and inconvenient ones), but this institution was really testing their limits. "Ok, let me get this straight," they said in a meeting with every conductor in the conservatory and their advisor. "You're all vampires?"

"Oh, not me," said their advisor, with an embarrassed laugh. "I just do paperwork."

"Neat, ok. And you're going to indoctrinate me ... when?"

"Inoculate, darling," said Owls Eldower. "And as soon as possible! Auditions



for our Advanced Symphony Orchestra are fast approaching.”

“We need extra people in the chamber groups, and I believe you’d fare excellently in the advanced orchestra,” said Alicia Callifer, looking severely down her nose at Erwin. They did their best not to snort. *Excellently?*

“You have an innate understanding and appreciation of musical theory and structure,” said Mr. Farris. “You’ve got a lot of potential. If you put in more effort, you’d probably surpass most of my other students.”

“You’re being offered a great opportunity. You realize this?” said Dr. Tolliver Coriolane, with a small, lean smile.

“Can we get back to the vampires?” said Erwin. “In order to get into the advanced orchestra, I’ll have to go around drinking people’s blood?”

“Oh, nothing so crude!” laughed Owls Eldower. “We are energy vampires! We gather and focus energy and auras and feed off of those. When we move an audience to tears or a standing ovation with our resounding symphony, their joy and release vibrate along with us. That is how we feed.”

Erwin wasn’t really looking at him, but they could hear the awe and intensity of someone whose eyes were lit up building in his voice. “Yeah, ok,” they said. “And the audition for this is ... what?”

“A piece of your choosing,” said Alicia Callifer. “Although he will expect it to be appropriately challenging. You don’t even have to play it in front of us—he’ll come once he hears it if he recognizes you.”

“You’re not auditioning for us,” said Dr. Coriolane. “You’re auditioning for the ghost of Paganini. If he approves of your performance, he will appear and take your instrument once you are finished and bring it to us. We will each fill it with some of our essence, you will drink it, and then you’re in.”

That sounded gross, but “you’re being offered a great opportunity, you realize that?” and yes, they did.

*Close*, said the viola. Erwin was cutting back across the wheel between the greenhouse and their dorm, through one of the high-ceilinged thoroughfares in the small commercial district. “Shut uuuppp,” they growled to both instruments on their back and then had to amend “oh god, not you, sorry,” to a startled busker. The busker turned out to be pretty chill with it—her name was Caro, and she played the penny whistle and the harmonica and a small drum she struck with her foot. Erwin could tell she’d been off beat for the last few minutes, but she was funny

and sweet and in awe of the stickers on Erwin's violin case. And Erwin was able to visit her later, too, and they learned that Caro also liked to sing. She was born on the satellite, and she was trying to figure out how to quit her job in ventilation maintenance because it was getting really dangerous, what with all the tunnel goons and everything. She liked to chew on her lip when she was concentrating, and her plans to not go to college were practical and money-based, but she liked to pretend it was because the admissions officers were all mean because they really were.

Now, Erwin was prone to setting unrealistic expectations for themselves, but not for things like this. They knew they weren't in the best place for romance. They were exhausted all the time, and they couldn't get their hands to stop shaking, and they kept going to practice rooms and just sitting in them, staring blankly at the wall. Everything felt fuzzy and far away, so it was easy to tell themselves they were handling everything just fine, but ignoring the wrongness turned it into a slow build in the background. The second-to-last movement of a Beethoven symphony, crawling up through chord progressions to the last. There was just so much to keep track of, what with the scales and the exercises and the vampire solo pieces and the nonvampire solo pieces and wondering when everyone would figure out they couldn't do it. If Caro hadn't given them her number, Erwin was certain they wouldn't have crossed paths again. *I'll figure out how to be a better friend once I get the hang of everything else*, they thought once, avoiding Caro's busking spot so they wouldn't have to tell them they didn't have time to talk. They still half-hoped Caro would spot them and call them over, but the only voice calling out to them was the viola. *He is close. Release my master. Take me home.*

Yeah ... ok, what the fuck were they supposed to do with that? Unpack it? No, thank you. "I'll desting you if you don't cut it out," Erwin said.

Erwin learned more from the focus groups they were put in with other prospective auditioners. What happened if Paganini didn't show up? Well, that made you a bit of a liability, but there was still a place for you—you could join the vampires' militia. They were doing important work keeping the area surrounding the conservatory free of outside threats (the whole vampire pyramid scheme they had going on was, unsurprisingly, a little unstable). You have a militia? Oh no, students, we have a militia. Do you get your instrument back after the inoculation? Yes, of course. Does your instrument become a vampire too? What? Next question.

Erwin wondered what kind of threats they were protecting against, where they

patrolled. Caro was afraid to go into work sometimes; her coworkers kept getting attacked and harassed by tunnel goons. They weren't sure they liked where this was going, so they asked their questions about Paganini instead. They learned he'd been brilliant but unstable, that he had a habit of gambling away his instruments. They wondered if he felt like they did now: loose and shaky, shrinking under their instructor's hungry gaze. He probably wouldn't have needed an instructor, but there must have been something else eating his life. Their viola, when they brought it to class, always perked up at this. *Here. He's here.*

They were excited by feeding at first—it was why they'd decided on violin performance. Their dad took them to a symphony when they were young, and Erwin still remembered almost crying with joy. They understood how music was powerful. So the rest of their powerpoints made sense; it took only the best music to get the strongest reaction. It looked less appealing once they explained that learning how to feed on energy was a process in and of itself, and they would have to take on yet another 1-credit course to learn how. Until then, they'd have to do things “the old-fashioned way,” Alicia Callifer had explained with distaste.

That was part of the militia's job, Erwin realized. They went out stealing blood from people in order to feed the inexperienced new recruits.

“Yep, uhuh, that's the first problem,” said Caro, hand on Erwin's shoulder. “The one that has to do with me. And we're absolutely coming back to that because I *sweartogod* I'm about to quit my job, but what's the other one?”

Erwin lifted up their violin case. “Can't play,” they got out eventually.

Caro's teeth touched her lower lip. “What happens when you do?”

“Cry. Can't stop.”

“How long?”

Erwin held up 2 fingers and said, “Weeks.”

Caro's arms squeezed around them. “You tell your creepy undead professors?”

“No,” whispered Erwin, and they sat intertwined.

Luckily, they came up with a plan together. Erwin wasn't going to just not audition if they could help it, and they knew someone who had another way to get in touch with the ghost of Paganini, even if that someone had so far only been a voice in their head.

*Yes, I know where my master is,* said the viola when they asked it. *He is here. They*

*laid him beneath the earth.* (This ghost's off its rocker, said Caro. We're on a satellite). "Can you take us there?" said Erwin, and the viola was happy to lay out directions. Caro let them into the labyrinth of wide, silvery ventilation tunnels that made up the skin of the satellite, and the viola directed them with increasing excitement (*He is here! I can smell him!*) They were just under the conservatory when the kids showed up, trigger-happy and fashionably rugged. Even sprinting from them, Erwin was reminded of almost every annoying person in their high school's orchestra.

At the center of a winding series of tunnels, they climbed a long ladder up a hatch and met a little golden room at the back end of the conservatory. It was up against the outer edge of the satellite, and Erwin could hear the lines of escape pods humming. There he stood, in all his spectral glory. He smiled, flashing a set of wicked canines, and held out a long-fingered hand.

"Ok, hang on buddy." Erwin struggled to open the viola case. Below them, the militia was frantically calling for backup ("They're in the sanctuary! That's not ok! Someone get the tasers!") Behind them, a gold-plated door swung open.

"Erwin?" It was Mr. Farris. "Oh! Uh, your honor," he dipped his head to the ghost. "I'm pleased to see you've summoned him, but you *really* aren't supposed to be in this room."

Erwin said, "Yeah, just give me a moment," while Caro said "Looking for the bathroom." The ladder below them began vibrating with clambering militia feet while yet another door on the ceiling burst open and Dr. Coriolane sailed down on a pair of great leathery wings, crying, "What do you think you're doing?!"

"I'm just—" they'd finally gotten the viola out. *Is it truly you?* breathed the specter, and the viola said *Yes, I am here! I waited for so long. I would have run to you, but I had no legs*, and the specter said *But instead, you flew to me, through the darkest night*, and Mr. Farris said, "I've never seen him speak so much in my life," and this was when the specter took the viola and the bow in hand, and the viola said, *You have waited long enough, master. Let us rest*, and they both vanished in a snap of stagelight brightness.

The two vampires and the militia gaped at Erwin in horror.

They ended up stealing one of the escape pods, in the end. "They didn't successfully vampire you," said Caro. "So ... you gonna un-register for that feeding class?"

Obviously, there were bigger issues at hand. But because the escape pod was still

looping its way towards its preprogrammed destination, they ended up laughing at how there wasn't going to be a pissed-off rich kid who hadn't made the audition bringing them someone's blood. Caro started singing at one point, and Erwin joined in with their rusty voice. They were certain they sounded like shit, but something warm was spreading in their chest, and they could feel the blood returning to their fingers and toes.

# Deep Sands

*Jonathan Campbell*

The desert was impossibly vast. It ran until it met the pale yellow of the horizon, and then some. It was occasionally broken up by remnants of concrete and rebar sticking up from the sand like the bones of long-extinct animals.

Mil lived there, as did his father, Met. His mother had once lived there too, but she had taken ill seasons ago and never recovered.

They lived under the sand, as everyone did in those lean times. Their walls were metal grating lined with plastic sheets to keep the sand in place, their roof an especially large piece of scrap metal that didn't leak very often. They had little furniture, just small mats to sleep on and makeshift chairs. Their stove, properly ventilated, took up a corner, the brush pile right beside it. Met would bring back posters for Mil, and hang them up on the wall where there was space.

Met was away from home often. He was a part of the territorial guard that kept Mil and his neighbors safe from harm. Mil wished his father was home more, even if he brought back fresh meat to cook and the occasional poster.

Mil had few friends. There were other children in the area, but they visited rarely. It wasn't safe to be outside all day without the proper protection, and even then it still wasn't safe for children as a rule. A bone-clad marauder might grab you, or a chitin-bearing six-legged beast might eat you for dinner.

He did have one friend. It wasn't a real person, just a small metal thing about the size of a field mouse. In appearance, his friend was made of metal, exposed wires, and flickering lights. His friend was named Seeroh Wun.

Mil and Seeroh would talk for hours during the lonely day. Seeroh spoke few words, but that was okay with Mil. He just liked having someone who would listen. Met almost never did. Every time Mil tried to explain that he wanted to be a guard like his father, that he wanted to go outside more, he would be met with refusals or worse, silence. Seeroh never told Mil he couldn't do anything, or told him what to do. Seeroh would listen, and sometimes say "Good" or "Bad," or even "Happy" or "Sad," on rare occasions.

Seeroh would bring Mil gifts as well. Small pieces of technology lost to time, most without function. Small wafers of a strange material, metal inlaid. Mil hid the gifts in a spot in the wall. The prize of his collection was a small flashlight that worked intermittently. Mil hid it with particular care, wrapped up in a spare rag. He knew that if his father saw it, he would sell it immediately for some medicine or food. Mil felt he was entitled to at least one thing that was his. Something as impressive as his father's spear or crossbow.

One day, Seeroh came to Mil with a limp. Their back right leg was damaged, the bottom section missing. Mil offered comforting words, but was surprised when Seeroh headed towards Mil's hiding place. Mil uncovered it, withdrawing the various components. Seeroh limped towards one, a small piece of metal with wires wrapped around it. Mil watched, unsure if he could help. He watched Seeroh line up their wounded leg with the part, forcing it into the joint. The leg adjusted itself to account for the length of the makeshift limb, stretching out to stay even with the rest.

Seeroh turned back to Mil, looking him in the eye. "Good. Happy," they said, adding a third word that Mil had never heard from them, "Friend."

Mil could hardly sleep that night, not even after a hearty dinner with Met. He had always seen Seeroh as a friend, someone to talk to. To know that they felt the same was incredible, affirming.

It would take several seasons before Seeroh would need help again, and by then Mil had grown into a young man. He had grown so tall that the cramped confines of their house had truly started to bother him; he was allowed outside more, but the average day was at best punctuated by sticking his head outside for a few moments before going back underground.

The community had grown, too. The homes were now guarded by walls made from packed sand and rebar. There were talks about connecting up the homes with tunnels and even building above ground.

Met was working late hours now. He trusted Mil to keep himself safe. Mil still felt he deserved more. The danger of the outside world seemed like a small price to pay if it meant he would have space to simply live.

Seeroh had kept visiting Mil, coming back increasingly worn down. Mil had become adept at fixing Seeroh when needed, a skill that had translated well to other matters. He had few proper tools, but his efforts had gotten him a toolbox and rough handmade wrenches and screwdrivers.

One day, Seeroh came with a different kind of treasure. A worn key, with an attached label that Mil could barely read. When he could finally piece together the words he was ecstatic. He knew where it was for.

Nights before, Met had relayed to Mil that a new ruin had been discovered, a large warehouse that was still standing despite the winds and sand. His father had mentioned it to let Mil know that he might soon get some better tools, but Mil had another idea. If he could get into that warehouse, unlock whatever secrets it held, he could prove to his father that he was ready to join him outside, and no longer be housebound for most of the day.

It was early enough that if Mil acted now, he could make it to the warehouse without being seen. He wouldn't be back in time, but Mil assumed that returning with goods on his own would dispel any concerns. He gathered up his surface gear, the heavy cloak and hood along with goggles, enough to shield him from the desert. He slipped on his infrequently worn boots, marked by their wide sole that would keep a man aloft even the loosest of dunes. Finally, he fished out his long-treasured flashlight, tucking it away. Mil climbed up the ladder to exit and was surprised to find Seeroh had joined him, perched on his shoulder.

The walk out of town was liberating and nerve-racking for Mil. It felt good to be free of the confines of his house, but he was worried that a guard might stop him and ask where he was going, or worse, his father might see him and put an end to the venture before it could even begin. To his fortune and quiet disappointment, neither happened. He was going to make it to this warehouse. Seeroh said little as they traveled.

The warehouse itself was fairly easy to find. The air was clear today, with only the occasional sandy breeze. The building fixed itself on the horizon, a massive structure that stood three men tall with an uncountable length. The sign in front had long since been worn down, but the logos that remained matched the key.

The sun had begun to lower by the time Mil made it to the front of the building, and he found he was losing his nerve by now. The only thing pushing him forward was the assurance that he wouldn't like what happened if he came home without having achieved anything. That concern carried him through the empty doorway into the warehouse. He fished his flashlight out from under the cloak, flicking it on in his hand. Seeroh clung closely to him, having said nothing on the journey over.

Mil began his search for the locked door, box, whatever, finding nothing that matched the key. He trudged further into the store, avoiding broken glass and



jagged metal as he worked his way down the sandy aisle. The shelves were all but empty, some bearing the remains of packaged goods, others stained with dried and rotted things. A heavy catwalk hung above the shelves. It had fallen in some places but was remarkably mostly there.

He could feel his heart racing as he made it to the back of the warehouse, the sun all but fallen, casting long, long shadows across the building. His flashlight was the only source of light now, casting a warm yellow glow across the ruined wall in front of him. Mil felt his way across it, finally noticing a door with a knob still in place. He fumbled for the key, dropping the light for a moment. He could feel his stomach drop as the ruined structure plunged into darkness for a moment.

With shaky hands he picked the light back up, holding it firmly as he procured the key. Mil pushed the key into the lock, keenly aware of how old both it and the key were. The key fit, fortunately, and Mil rushed to turn the stiff door knob. He had to shove the door open and was rewarded with the sight of a remarkably well-preserved room, adorned with tools that had an unknown purpose. Mil scrambled into the room, looking over the tools, the strange pictures, the metal cans.

He had only begun to grab when he could when he heard a horrible noise and sunk low to his knees and flicked off his light, now edging towards the door. A beast had come to this ruin, and in the dim light, he could see it slink through the entrance. It was marked by rows of spears that pierced its shell, a testament to its strength. There would be no time to run, but staying here would be equally deadly.

The beast stalked the ruins, grinding teeth filling the air. Mil was dead silent, Seeroh clutched tight against his chest, the flashlight held firm. There was nothing that could be done but wait for the loathsome thing to leave. The darkness surrounding the young man and the mechanical mouse was all-consuming, the faint starlight and the moon providing just enough light for the beast's chitin to shine.

Mil could hear the beast getting closer now, its many feet dragging across the floor, kicking metal and brick out of the way. It stepped on the shards of glass Mil had so carefully avoided without so much as a pained grunt.

Seeroh twitched quietly in Mil's grasp, and he broke from the spell of fear long enough to look down at his companion. Seeroh looked at him, and then the ruined scaffolding above them. Mil shook his head, and Seeroh looked between the two again, punctuating the gesture by tapping themselves with their paw. Mil wanted to say no, now understanding Seeroh's intent, but he reluctantly released the mouse anyway. They scurried from his grasp to the adjacent wall, scaling it with ease. Once

on the scaffolding, Seeroh began to head away from the beast, from Mil, and Mil worried for a second that he had been abandoned.

Instead, once Seeroh had gotten so far from Mil that they could barely be seen, they began to scratch at the scaffolding, quietly. Quiet to Mil, anyway. The beast heard it just fine. It quickly turned around, and stalked towards Seeroh's point, with the confident pace of a true predator.

Mil quietly began to move away while Seeroh made noise, drawing the beast further away. Mil kept his eyes towards the beast, of course. He trusted Seeroh would do what they could, but Seeroh was just a small thing. They couldn't hurt the beast, and once the beast realized they had no meat, it would leave their broken body alone.

Mil had almost made it out of the ruined building when he heard the scaffolding shudder, the ancient metal groaning from across the building. He turned around, shocked to see that the beast had scrambled up onto the scaffolding to chase Seeroh. A deep instinctual fear took hold, and Mil ran.

As he did, he could hear Seeroh make a loud noise, as if they were yelling. He strained his ears, and was shocked when he realized what Seeroh *was* yelling. One word, "Now!"

A sharp metal cacophony erupted from the surrounding sands, and a horde of glittering, patchwork things rose, stalking towards the beast who reared its head and shrieked in confusion. They quickly leapt upon it, and within moments it had been torn apart.

Seeroh dashed towards Mil, who was standing there in a dazed stupor. "Friend," Seeroh said, gesturing with one paw to him, and "Friends," gesturing towards the crowd of mechanical beasts.

From then on, Mil's village never feared beasts or other dune-stalking mutants, and they grew to be mighty off of Mil's unlikely friendship and kindness. Even in his later years, when the sands had quieted and the village had become a town, Mil would remember to tell the children, his and all others, one simple thing. To always be kind, especially to those who are weaker than you, as he had been to Seeroh, and Seeroh had been to him.

# Lookalike

*Samantha Gibbs*

You look just like your mother  
You have her cheeks  
Her lips  
Her hair  
Her eyes  
*God*, you look just like your mother  
Does anyone tell you that?  
That you look just like your mother?  
Do you have her brain too?  
Her smarts?  
Her determination and perseverance?  
Do you not have what she bares to the public?  
Or do you keep that to yourself?  
Hide it away as a secret for you alone?  
Something to revel in every time someone asks,  
Don't you know you look *just* like your mother?  
Yet beneath the dark black red and spidery webbed blue  
I have His addiction  
His anger  
His same bloody fists  
His capability to run right back into the arms of a burning home  
Of chaos  
Of a life no peace can be known from  
Deep-set is  
The rage that runs tight through His veins and curls on the same face you say is my  
mothers  
The criminality of my blood outweighs the curve of my jaw  
Yet if I warped every bone, every bend, every sharp line that paints the same picture

Of the woman who you say I'm so like,

Would you see my mother?

Or would you finally understand that me and my father are more similar than you'd like to admit

# Grim Scales

*Charlie Miller*

The only relief the seven hunters had in sight was the shape of their destination, an island with gnarled palm trees and woven black sand, a source of corruption they'd, until now, held out a slight hope had been fake. Another sailors' story of a distant sight in the dead of night.

Their scout, Mikhail, had withdrawn a spyglass, his prized possession, something which had cost him a fair gold price at a market, and was scanning the beaches with it. Everyone waited tersely for his verdict; he was the best spotter amongst them.

He looked away, retracting the spyglass and tucking it back into his armored overcoat. He wordlessly reached for his crossbow, which he'd left propped up against a section of the deck.

"Well ... ?"

Another member of the crew asked, this one named Melody.

"All the signs are there. Blood runs through the sand. The trees are ... changing, even as we speak. It's real."

Soon enough, they were as close as the captain would take them. A smaller man, gnomish, the only one willing to take them out here.

The leader of the group, an elf named Killian, looked over at the captain.

"As we agreed, you'll remain here for four hours. Then you're free to leave."

The captain looked as if he may have wanted to protest. But the coin and Killian's intimidating figure lead to him simply nodding. The group then filed off the deck and into the rowboat they were using for landfall, and once more in silence, the seven headed for shore. The trip taking only a few minutes, they soon reached the black sands of the islands. Disembarking their craft, and doing a final check of weapons and armor. They each had different kinds, the only running theme being vials of holy water, two per person, and three wooden stakes on each of them. Two tried and true tools. The only better circumstance would have been coming during the day, but then again, if they'd done that, the prey would be reclusive. Here, they stood a chance in a straight-up fight.

Immediately, though, they all noticed something unsettling. As they stepped across the sand, what Mikhail had said was true. The ground was infused with blood. And it bled with every step.

“Guess it’s not hungry,” a dwarven hunter named White remarked, getting pointed looks from the more serious members of the group.

Eventually, though, they got off of the beach. Reaching the foliage, though it seemed more dense than they had seen from the shore. Gnarled plants, blackened and grayed as if rotted, hardened and blocked their paths. Some of them had more of the crimson liquid of life rolling down their leaves and branches, as if they were overflowing with it. Either way, the foliage could still be cleared. A well built hunter named Srella took to clearing out the plants with a greatblade, slowly but surely making a path through the brush, more blood leaking out as they were cut, causing her entire front to be coated in the trickling liquid.

The hunters waited with anticipation as they slowly crept through. Suddenly, the hacking and slashing in front of them came to a stop. Srella, whose strokes had gotten slower and slower, slowly fell forward. The healer, Stevens, hurried forward to see what was wrong, and turned her around.

A small creature, about the size of a mouse, had burrowed into her throat and out of the side. More blood soaked the soil, which seemed to pulsate and spew out more, as if celebrating new blood. The creature itself was insectoid with reptilian scales, a pair of pincers, and claws being used to burrow. Other holes in other parts of her body, through the entrail and limb, spewing more blood. Had she not noticed what she’d been covered in?

Not much time to contemplate. In their urge to gather around their injured comrade, to help where they could, they’d left one member, named Cait, on the very outskirts of their circle. Her cry of pain was more immediate, and quickly turned into a shriek. Each turned to see her stumbling back ... with a thick sound of the moving of flesh, the piercing of it. She’d been impaled by three plant ferns with edges sharper than steel. On the ends, like they’d spent time digging through, were pieces of organs and entrails, covered in blood, held aloft like trophies. Her scream was cut off, as she lost too much blood in the span of a few moments, her body now held aloft like her pieces had been. The ground beneath her also began to pulsate, like it had near Srella.

The five remaining were quick to form up, wordlessly moving for shore. They needed open ground.

However, most of them would not reach it. Their formation was broken by a tree movement, moving like a massive club towards Stevens. Before anyone could react, he was sent flying; his pulverized body flew into a nearby stone in a burst of human paste, which was outlined against the moonlight. As they picked up the pace, White tripped over a root and didn't get up. Killian turned him over and saw his eyes rolled into his head, mouth gurgling with blood pushed into his throat. The remaining three ran to the beach and actually made it there.

They could feel the forest shifting behind them. The remaining trio. The last hunters standing.

Their boat was but a few meters away. Sprinting now, as fast as their legs could carry them. One of them was gone by the time they reached it. They saw a hand faintly protruding from the sand, indicating where they'd been, before it sunk out of sight. Killian saw a large, shifting figure in the trees, along with smaller ones. He wordlessly drew his blade and advanced, only hearing the scream behind him when it was too late.

He died alone.

# Animus (why you left me)

*Iris Newlin*

They took me in for a scan because things kept going wrong. I was growing hair at night, long and itchy on my arms and my stomach, weeping in spirals down from my elbows. I was worried a patch of discolored skin running the length of the right side of my ribcage was going to start growing scales—or maybe feathers?—so far it hadn't, but the area was goosebumping and mottling in a way that made me certain there was something beneath. Or many things—I didn't say eggs, I wasn't going to think eggs, but I could feel the idea, unthought and unbidden, right in there with whatever they were.

Those were dark days: the beginning of September. And something had me by the throat, and someone had me by the hand. Not in a way I could tell anyone about either, although I suppose if I'd tried harder, I may have actually gotten somewhere. But the hand at my throat wouldn't let me speak it (though I could sometimes picture the shape of it, distorted and softer than my own hands), and I knew it was useless to gesture up at it with my own hands. It wasn't that something was actively stopping my hand in its tracks; it was that I would be all too aware of the other hand over mine, a warm and fleshy web against my palm. Sometimes the hand had arms that would encircle me, an embrace to lose myself in, and I wouldn't be able to look around with my eyes for days.

My parents finally thought I was just being lazy when I wouldn't finish tests, writing MONSTER MONSTER MONSTER MONSTER in the margins of the multiple choice until the instructor called time. But on school picture day, I was paralyzed under the bright lights, and half a dozen people screamed as my face convulsed, my lips rolling in on themselves and my eyes bisecting into pink, six-armed starfish, their limbs leaving weepy trails against my face.

At first, I was only surprised at all the fuss. It had felt like I'd flinched and suddenly gotten two eye infections and a massive headache, and that was well within my purview. But I was exhausted from clawing at the hand in my hand, so I lay down on their towels and took their water. This was maybe a mistake. They asked



me questions, and at some point, I went to the emergency room, and then they asked me more questions, and I never said the right thing once. I'd given up on the tests already, so I hadn't expected it to hurt as much as it did.

The school contacted my parents, and they signed me off on a scan, to see if they could isolate the monster. Those were dark days, so I couldn't tell them, even though I was certain they were making a mistake. Any minute now, they'd realize I was overreacting and their tests would come back negative and they'd give my parents the bill and there'd be hell to pay. I stared at the waiting room floor and cursed myself for leaving my eyes open, for losing razors, for not pulling myself from the embrace. At the very least, I could've picked a better word than MONSTER to fill margins with. It didn't mean anything, really; it was just a word I liked the shape of—I used to doodle or write stories, but that got almost as exhausting as the tests themselves. And I could have just sat there, but it felt good to leave at least some mark where I was supposed to. I liked having work that felt like mine.

And I was going to lose this now, wasn't I? I'd finally gone too far. After this latest stint, they'd all figure that the attention was just encouraging me. I'd proven I couldn't be trusted with paper or pictures.

Then they had me lie down in the machine, and I realized that, oh, I had already lost this. It was long gone. God in heaven, how could I ever have had it? Under the radiation-protective blankets and buzzing white dome, their probing with electromagnetics brought something rolling up to the surface of my skin. My vision went bright, then murky, and I felt myself suspended over a hole of the dark painful whiteness I saw when I rolled my eyes, the closest to the inside of my skull I've ever come. And up from the depths swam the creature, its long, buttery limbs making arcs like the passage of the sun. Its mouth was a little red, its eyes had starfished into flowers, its hands massive and veiny and pale. It was more real than anything had felt in six months, and it was here and it was headed straight for me.

They had bits of my vile body in containers that they brought back into labs with them: two syringes of blood, hair, half a jar of pee. They were going to do laser therapy on my blood, they said, to see how the monster parts would react. They'd done something else to take the monster out of me completely, while I was in the machine, although it didn't look like it to me. They were pissed at us for asking them to explain it again, though, and we elected to just head home.

That was quite a scare, my parents told me. Quite a scare you gave us. Thank goodness they caught it in time.

I didn't say anything.

We waited three weeks. They felt like all time felt to me, formless and glutinous and hole-shaped, like the creature's embrace. I looked through my room for my razors. My mom filled out a form that allowed me to have my picture retaken at the school's earliest convenience. I wasn't given any more tests.

So I had no basis, really, for worrying the thing was still there. I couldn't make myself lie on my bed and close my eyes to check if I could still access the warm, sticky embrace of the creature, because I hadn't been able to sleep since the scan. I had no basis except for the concern when we drove back to the hospital building to view the monster they'd removed, I felt something inside me sit up and look around, and say, *It's Here*. And then, when the screams started, it's *Coming*.

When it arrived, it stood in the doorway and looked at me. I summoned all my strength and turned my head to look back at it. It looked at me, and it looked so sad. It kept turning and turning and turning its head, and I was too tired to turn away, and it was the worst thing I would ever see, and the question it asked me was the worst one it could ask.

It didn't understand why we were separated. I apologized, like a fool, and it rushed forward and we were reunited. And oh, how we reunited. Our skins could not contain themselves, and they burst open in stringy layers. I could feel my eyes running in with my teeth. I rushed towards it. The part of me that burns and bends and dreams that I've always thought of as my soul, in the wet pulsating motion that only my uncut body could have, scrabbling across the floor to meet its friend.

# Best Friend

*Clara Fuehler*

you move towards my ear  
whispering  
secrets we both spoke with eyes  
before we laughed

knowing the voice of your brow,  
the tilt of your head,  
the curve of your lips,  
my greatest gift.

and so I peer into the green  
eyes that smile on their own,  
met with enemies they've already beaten  
in my admiration.

your voice calling,  
beckoning me to life  
you say I deserve,  
the life you give  
me, graciously.

I try to match the beautiful stride you've set for us.  
you reach out your hand,  
and carry me along,  
my only bliss.



# Arcane Wave of the Orca

*Julian Stokes*

Aquatint

# Inflicted Insight

*Ainsley Kalb*

After the almighty saw fit to ravish me as a swan,  
Something odd occurred.  
My husband could no longer satisfy me.  
One night, as he lay atop me,  
I mustered my courage and asked,  
“Could you try putting this on?”  
It was an outfit stitched together from thousands of feathers.

He begrudgingly obliged.  
I came instantly.

Soon, Tyndareus left me,  
Soon, I alone raised Helen,  
Clytemnestra, Castor, and Pollux,  
I alone was left to wonder which were his  
And which were His.

One night as I lay with the children,  
He came to me again,  
He said he had come to watch his children,  
But I begged him to fuck me again.

He eagerly obliged.  
I came hard and often.

Soon, the children were grown,  
But He kept visiting them,  
And me,  
I was the sole object of his desire.  
Not Her,  
An old woman who could no longer satisfy her husband,  
But Me.

Or so I thought,  
Until one day a woman in the marketplace,  
Speaking to her friend,  
Mentioned having had sex with a swan.

That night, when He returned,  
I stabbed  
Him  
I plucked  
Him  
I carved  
Him  
And I ate  
Him.

Or so I thought,  
That poor swan.

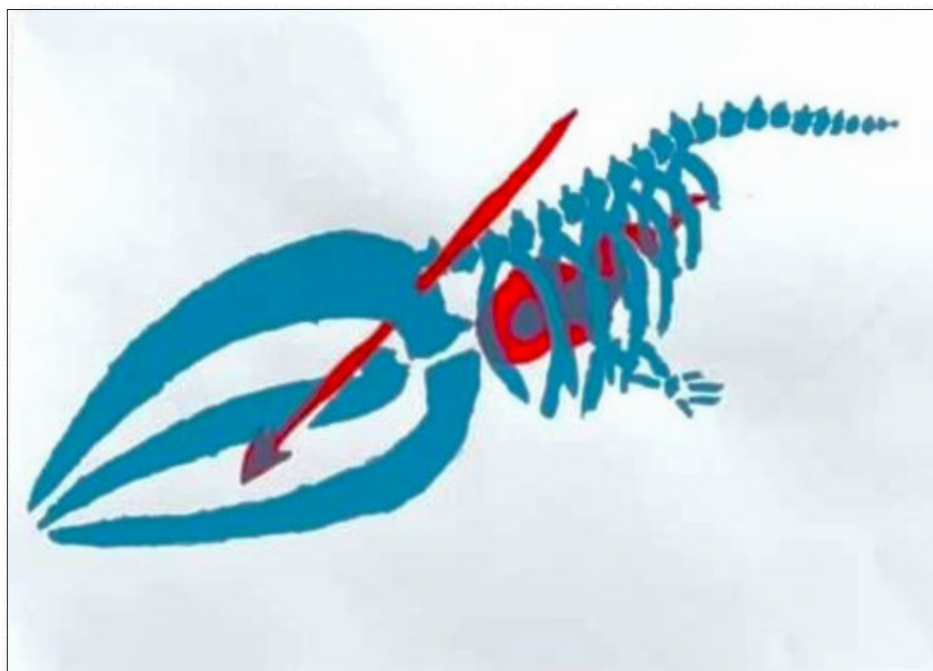
He saw what I had done,  
And told me all swans would spur my advances.

My four children grew up and left me.  
Helen was the most beautiful woman in the world.  
Clytemnestra became a queen like her sister.  
My sons became literal stars.  
And I was reduced to an old woman,  
Staring at swans.

# The tongue

*Abram Greene*

It's as powerful as lighting  
sharp like a knife  
It can cause division  
And can create strife  
This can cause men to come together  
or a family to break apart  
Could also cause anybody  
to get the desires of their heart  
This device  
is very nice  
But be sure  
to use it well and be wise  
This is nothing to play with  
you can't catch words and put them in chains  
You can't press rewind  
and start all over again  
Using your words  
speak truth and speak well  
Because a tongue speaking love  
sounds quite swell



# Lost

*Julian Stokes*

Screen Print



# Cooperating Room

*Ainsley Kalb*

## CAST:

Appearances and genders are fluid. The Children's Choir can be played by up to 6 people at once.

### **The Patient**

**The Impatient:** Should either be the same gender as The Patient or visibly genderqueer.

### **The Surgeon**

**The Children's Choir:** Needn't be literal children, but should appear off-puttingly youthful.

## NOTES:

All lines by The Children's Choir should be sung, but as poorly and arhythmically as possible while still being understandable. Pauses should occur before and after each song from The Children's Choir. Pronouns should be changed as appropriate.

## SCENE:

*An operating theatre. The **Patient** and **Impatient** sit on surgical beds parallel to each other with room for the **Surgeon** to stand between them. The **Children's Choir** stands off to one side.*

**Patient:** And you're sure this will work?

**Impatient:** I should bloody well hope so.

**Surgeon:** Your friend is quite right. Everything will be fine. It's not a common procedure, admittedly, but it's not unheard of.

**Choir:** The procedure was relatively rare/

To join two lovers by the hair/

To turn what was once a pair/

Into an abomination.

**Impatient:** (*whispering to **The Patient** loudly enough for **The Surgeon** to be unable to help but overhear*) If he calls us friends one more time...

**Patient:** It's okay, honey. Eyes on the prize... Eyes on the prize.

**Impatient:** You're sure you want to do this?

**Patient:** That's the whole point. What's the last time you can remember me being sure of anything?

**Surgeon:** Alright pals, it's time for the anesthesia. Ready?

*Before either can respond, the stage goes dark other than for **The Children's Choir**.*

**Choir:** No rest for the wicked/  
No rest for the weary/  
With eyes closed/  
You can truly see clearly/  
The windows to the soul/  
Are the walls of the heart/  
With eyes locked forever/  
You're forever apart.

*Lights up around **The Patient** and **The Impatient**, whose eyes should remain closed throughout this scene. **The Surgeon** should be operating on them.*

**Patient:** Do you feel that?

**Impatient:** I can't feel anything. I'm under anesthesia.

**Patient:** How are we talking, then?

**Impatient:** I don't know. Maybe this is just what it feels like at first.

**Patient:** I thought we were supposed to both be one. There's clearly me and there's clearly you.

**Impatient:** How do you know?

**Patient:** I can tell.

**Impatient:** How?

**Patient:** I just can.

**Impatient:** Well in that case I'm sold.

*Long pause.*

**Impatient:** I'm sorry. I'm just nervous.

**Patient:** I know, honey. But it'll be okay. It's what I wanted, remember?

**Impatient:** Don't you mean what "we" wanted?

**Patient:** That's what I said.

**Impatient:** It's not, but I know better than to argue with you.

**Patient:** What did I say, then?

**Impatient:** You said it's what I wanted.

**Patient:** What you wanted? I mean, you wanted it, sure, but why would I tell you what you wanted?

**Impatient:** No, no, you didn't say it was what I wanted, you said it was what you wanted.

**Patient:** What? ... Oh, I see. Sorry for the confusion.

**Impatient:** It's alright.

**Patient:** Hey, this might be the last time that ever happens, huh?

*Short pause.*

**Impatient:** Yeah...

*Stage goes dark other than for **The Children's Choir**.*

**Choir:** One, two, three, four/

What was once a couple/

Will soon be more/

Nothing like they were before/

The operation.

*Lights up around **The Surgeon**, still operating.*

**Surgeon:** (*to themselves*) I'm so happy to be able to do this for these two great pals. Gee, I'd love to have a friend like that. Instead, I've just got Chippy. Don't get me wrong, I love Chippy. But he's not a great conversationalist, you know? Mostly just barks. Sometimes he tries to hump my leg. I always get him off as quickly as possible when that happens, but I secretly like it just a bit. Physical intimacy. It's nice to know I'm wanted. Desirable.

I wonder if they still desire each other? Or, maybe desire isn't a platonic enough word. But, do they still want to hang out with each other? Or are they each other? Or are they something totally different that just happens to look like the two of them with their hair stuck together?

I guess I'll never find out. Not like Chippy can help me out much there. But Chippy's a good boy. I'll have to give him a treat when I get home.

*Lights down, then up on **The Children's Choir**.*

**Choir:** Chippy, Chippy, Chippy/  
Chippy is a good boy/  
Chippy, Chippy, Chippy/  
Chippy is a good, good boy/  
Chippy is a good, good, boy!

*Lights up for the whole stage. **The Surgeon** is finishing up.*

**Surgeon:** Voila!

*The **Patient** and **Impatient** slowly rise in unison, now connected by the hair. From this point on, all dialogue marked "**Im/Patient:**" is to be delivered by both actors, not necessarily in unison.*

**Im/Patient:** Thank you, doctor.

**Surgeon:** You're quite welcome, but I'm not a doctor.

**Patient:** Oh.

**Im/Patient:** All the same.

**Surgeon:** Yes, I suppose now is not a time to be splitting hairs.

***The Surgeon** holds for a laugh. None comes.*

**Surgeon:** *(clearing their throat)*. Alright, I'll leave you two to it. I'll be just down the hall if you need anything.

***The Surgeon** exits, passing by and shaking hands with **The Children's Choir**.*

**Choir:** And thus exits the surgeon!

**Im/Patient:** So...

**Impatient:** Is it what I wanted?

**Im/Patient:** Yes, very much so. Quite.

**Patient:** I love me, honey. Thank me for doing this.

**Im/Patient:** Your pleasure.

*Short pause.*

**Impatient:** So, is this it?

**Im/Patient:** I think so.

**Patient:** I thought it would feel more different.

**Im/Patient:** But it's okay. I'm together forever, now. Everything's certain.

**Impatient:** Certainly.

*Im/Patient laughs.*

**Choir:** What was two before/  
Is now just one but so much more/  
Look out world, here it comes/  
That terrific, horrific, pseudoscientific/  
Abomination!

**Im/Patient:** Hey, who are you calling an abomination?

*The Choir looks around and realizes Im/Patient can see them.*

**Choir:** You just had to open your stupid fucking mouths!

*The Choir begins beating up Im/Patient.*

Eli Basset  
Jonathan Campbell  
Clare Duda  
Clara Fuchler  
Samantha Gibbs  
Abram Greene  
Tamryn Herring  
Ainsley Kalb  
Kindra Mancini  
Charlie Miller  
Iris Newlon  
Nili Ocran  
Julian Stokes  
Ezra Wilson  
Sarah Wiseman





